**CHRISTIAN SPEECH**

**FOR**

**WILLIE BURKE**

**REVISED**

Hello everyone. It’s no secret that I have been here before, standing in front of you, delivering, what I have always hoped... and always intended... to be a thought provoking.... spiritually oriented... inspiring and motivating message. Every year, I do what I can to find a fresh perspective.... learning from the past in order to inform and support the future success of our spiritual context, the National Baptist Laymen’s Movement. Of course, my mission as President of this group has been to provide leadership, comfort, solace, purpose, and hopefully a bit of **wisdom,**  to our group, joined in faith, united in the belief that we are all connected through the heart, soul, and love of God. I’ve been searching my conscience and spirituality, testing my own personal waters, looking for the best, most articulate, compassionate messages to encourage this organization, to insure that I have been true to my pledge... to **OUR** mission, for the past \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ years. Every year is different. Every milestone we meet creates new rewards and and ups the ante, posing greater challenges. This year is especially unique... as most of you know, this meeting marks the completion of my tenure as President of the Laymen’s Movement.

While the core message is the same, each year, I pledge to myself.... and to all of you... to raise my own personal bar.... to go deeper into my studies, to learn from and find authentic lessons in the teachings of Jesus Christ.... to absorb the message... on greater, more purposeful levels.... and to find the words and actions to infuse hope and meaning into the lives of our fellow members. Whether we like it or not, times are changing. Challenges seem to be more frequent and stubborn.... possibly more threatening... and so we find ourselves in heightened situations in which stress and anxiety can tend to have a more than negative impact on our individual and collective well being. We search for the antidote... we crave a lifeline... we dream of redemption.... if you are in this room... if you can hear my voice...you **KNOW** where I’m going with this.... our solace is within reach right here, with one another. Our solutions are right here... in the shared conscience of our group.... our positive plans of action can be found in commitment.... to each other....to the community who needs us... and to our own well being.

Some of you might be thinking, “Well, if being the president of this movement... if leading a group, is so great, **why step down????”** Guess what??? That’s the **EXACT** time.... the **PERFECT** reason... to step aside. Completion serves a purpose.... it teaches us to make the most of our time in service, to maintain awareness, both personally and to what goes on around us, it guides us to be selfless... to pass the baton... to support and encourage fresh blood... new ideas... and invigorated perspective into our legacy, and to give someone else a chance at revelation. For over **EIGHTY** years, this brotherhood has worshipped and served, adapted in hard times, addressed issues threatening our well being and faith, and celebrated abundance and blessings. We stand on the shoulders of those that have preceded us. From a small but enthusiastic group of concerned brothers who came together back in 1924 to today, we have been shepherds in spreading the word of the Lord. I cannot even imagine what my life would have been like had I not brought myself and my faith to serving others through my participation. It was Winston Churchill who said, “We make a living by what we get, but we **make a life** by what we **give**.” Brothers.... this Laymen’s Movement serves as our context... it acts as our platform... it supports us and provides the means to connect... to share... to learn...and to grow... Isaiah 56:7, reminds us.... “My house shall be called a house of prayer... for all peoples.” We are drawn here in common purpose... let’s use it.

From Corinthians 9: 24-27, we learn, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we, an imperishable. Therefore, I run in such a way as not without aim. I box in such a way as not beating the air, but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I, myself, will not be disqualified.”

Life is a race.... existence is competition... within ourselves, as we ask the questions and seek the answers to what it means to be a fulfilled, complete, purposeful human being. Some appear to be more successful at it than others, but here’s the secret... life is not about competing with others... it’s about **challenging ourselves**... to be more present... to have more faith... to find more tolerance... to be more compassionate and understanding...to live life as an example for others that might be lost, to find an anchor... something to hold onto... in order to lift up their own spirits and lives. We have come together to be all those things to all of us.... in uncertain times, we change from one who searches for meaning and truth to one who finds his mission in guiding... ministering... and showing unbridled compassion to those in need. To be a part of our Laymen’s Ministry is to designate ourselves to humanity and faith... in all aspects of life.

Life is not counted in the perishable wreaths we may receive.... it’s counted in the intangibles... in the wisdom we discover.... and share... it’s measured in the challenges we overcome and the strengths we develop. It’s calculated in the mistakes we make.... and then the resolve we build... in the steps we take, individually, and as a collective group of committed men of faith, to leave this world... and our families... our friends... our colleagues....our communities... in a better, stronger place than they’ve ever been. Through our actions, I **know** we will find salvation.

**SALVATION**... that’s a word we hear often... but what is the actual definition??? Let’s find out. Let’s also keep in mind that an important aspect of participating and dedicating oneself to a successful mission is **understanding**... or at least the **willingness** to keep an open mind... to listen and acknowledge that, while we personally may not immediately know the answers, we are open to receive the calling that provides the truth....at the most literal and basic level. So many of us go through the motions of declaring commitment without truly understanding what, why, and how we need to do what we do. In a world that gets swept away in the “Hi Tech-ness” of it all, its critical to have understanding... to ask questions... to strive for clarity and wisdom in order to know why we do where lies our purpose... to hold on to the **humanity** of who we are and what we do and to use that clarity to make sure others understand within their own experience... and faith... as well. So... the meaning of salvation?? The dictionary gives several definitions, but I will share these two... and I encourage you all to search and research if there are other words and concepts you don’t quite understand or may take for granted....

1. **Salvation**... the act of saving or protecting from harm, risk, loss, destruction, etc.
2. ***In Theology***... deliverance from the power and penalty of sin; redemption.

Our mission and purpose for our Laymen’s Movement has always been simple, pure, and direct, and that is to strengthen our bond and expand our message and outreach by growing our base numerically, financially, and spiritually. This group has never been about competition between us...it hasn’t been about individual winning, it has **ALWAYS** been about strengthening our own inner lights and spreading that intensity. It has always been about shining that light... **OUR** light... to banish the darkness.... to give practical support and assistance to those that need it most...and through it all get closer to our own salvation. A few years ago, a popular newspaper adopted the slogan, “Democracy dies in darkness.” You know what??? That’s not the only casualty of diminished light.... **Wisdom** dies in darkness... **Faith** dies in darkness... **Hope**... **resolution**... **reform**... **well-being**.... **optimism**... they **ALL** die in darkness... (**If you want to make a joke, you can say**)... come to think of it, just about the **ONLY** thing that **DOESN’T** die in darkness is **MOLD**.... and **WHO NEEDS THAT**??? (**And wait for the laugh**)

In Acts 2: 42, we find, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” ... and in Timothy 1:12, “That is why I am suffering as I am, Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.” Our lives must be about **COMMITMENT**. If not, we float in the ether... without purpose... minus an anchor connecting us to those around us. We all possess the ability to commit. It’s how we choose to act upon and respect ourselves, our word, and our integrity, that will determine our own self fulfillment in this lifetime... and beyond. We are who we are because of the **people** in our lives, whether sinners or saints, who **were**... and **are**... **relentlessly** committed... or not... to **us**. We know what it feels like to have emotional, practical, and spiritual support. We know it feels like a void when we don’t have that consistency and devotion in our lives. The definition of commitment is, “a pledge or a promise, involvement, engagement, fulfillment of an obligation.” To commit is to **give your word** and **KEEP IT**.... and the act of committing begins within ourselves and our own conscience. We are here not to “look good...”.

Although .. I have to say... this **is** a good looking group!! (**Wait for the laugh)**. We’re not here to pretend to be on our best behavior for “someone else...” we’re not here for points or accolades... We’re here because God called to us... because we know, in our hearts, humanity **needs** us.. **WE** need us... The world is getting increasingly more complex and divisive. If we think or pretend that we don’t need this anchor to give us strength and resolve, we’d be lying... We are here to feel the truth... at the most basic level... and that is that we are better... stronger... and more humane **together**... through the word of God. We are here to **SERVE**.

For the past \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ years, I have explored and practiced the act of commitment in all aspects of my life, and especially, to this group.... notice I say **practice**... we all have **EVERYTHING** to learn... and even when I might have had weak moments here and there, I did my best to remember and hold onto my purpose... I heard the call... and even when that call was faint... I did what I could to pay attention and **listen**. ...To check for the signs within myself in order to serve the greater good. Yes... it’s vital... critical... life affirming... As Mahatma Gandhi said, “The best way to **find** yourself is to lose yourself in the **service** of others.” None of us exists in a vacuum. We alternate with having the ability to extend a hand while sometimes needing a hand to lift us up.

Throughout the years of my tenure, I’ve highlighted different aspects of what our Laymen’s Group is about, its make up, and who it potentially serves. I’ve outlined the types of groups that comprise our potential members so that we may identify and find the best way to support our growth... both in spirituality and in numbers.

At one point I mentioned there are five groups to reach.... I would bet we know people in each one or most of these groups... think about it... who do you know that might identify in one or more of these categories.... who do you know that would benefit from the brotherhood we continue to demonstrate? Who is out there, trying to make it on his own, who fits the description of one who should be here, with us, finding both salvation and the passion for service??

* The mass of unsaved men
* The mass of cultural Christians
* Men who are or want to be disciples
* Men who are or want to be teachers
* The men who appear wounded and hurting... those with “broken wings.”

With the advent of constant change and the mandate we face, with the call for action looming before us regarding sustaining our lives, identities, and purpose at this moment in our historic evolution... in which we face perpetual crises in our neighborhoods and communities, the time is overdue to take a stand and to support one another and our neighbors, but first we must heal.... we must find our inner strength... we must have a plan to be stronger... more engaged...more spiritually committed and resolute than ever before.

In Galatians 6:9, we learn, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” We **DO NOT.**.. we **CANNOT** give up. No matter what trials we face that we **THINK** are insurmountable, we must believe in the certainty that, step by step, we will conquer our foes... be they real or imagined... we **WILL** prevail. And we will find that strength together... but first we have to find our flock and let the words be clear... that salvation and redemption is for **ALL OF US**... as long as we are present... open to the Word of the Lord... and willing to receive... and serve.

How do we continue to function and find effectiveness in the face of adversity...?

 And let’s face it... to some of us, adversity is all we really have ever known... In the past, I have shared these thoughts on the matter... Remember we are all equal but some men come to God at a slower, quieter, more introspective pace while others may express overt enthusiasm. All have a place at the table of a Godly mission. Embrace difference, respect one another’s opinions and input, and know that you're in the right place when you walk with God. Our practice is not a race. It takes time and consideration and a certain amount of personal introspection in order to find your sustained path to enlightenment. Know that you have partners. Know that if you struggle with something…. A concept… a challenge, an expression of faith in the outside world, you have a whole network of brothers ready to walk with you.

I reminded our group that there are at least four essential components for strengthening our membership and building a movement....

* + - **A strong leadership team-** Much has been said about the wisdom of knowing that “Everything boils down to leadership.” It's true. It all starts from the top. Assemble four to twelve devoted men willing to see God work his magic. Meet as brothers once a week and use the time to bind and strengthen each other’s faith. Resist the temptation to focus on “operations.” Study your Bible as a group. Suggest that each man form his own discipleship group. This will strengthen their commitment to leadership and relationship.... (**If you want to make a joke you can say**)... And may I suggest we get on with it? There are ... **ahem**... leadership vacancies to aspire to and fill!! (**and wait for the laugh**).
		- **Interesting, productive, and relationship building events**. What we do is uplifting, enriching, and fascinating... Our work is so much more than fulfilling a spiritual obligation... **SPREAD THE WORD**! From momentum building mega events to community participation, sports retreats, arranging for guest speakers, and other functions, there are always new and creative ways to support and build engaging, productive groups.
		- **Win with one on one**... sometimes the first steps to being a part of a dynamic group is in a smaller, more personal setting. If you know of someone that might
		- be shy or resistant to more formal, public gatherings, consider being a mentor or “big brother” to one person at a time. You can slowly ease that person into a group setting as he becomes more comfortable. Remember, we are here to serve and service, even though it’s to one main objective, can be parsed in different ways... consider the best ways to achieve objectives. Although Christianity has a way to “fit all,” sometimes “tailoring the message” to the man makes sense.
		- **Discipleship groups**- identify disciples in your group that are ready to move up. Those that are worthwhile as leaders will self-identify. Try to avoid persuasion. That doesn't work and the disciple probably won't last as a leader. It's important to encourage vision in the younger, less experienced ranks. It’s crucial to have the perspective and energy that only youth can provide, but it’s critical for the youth of our communities to receive a global, well rounded, informed knowledge of how to share the word of God while doing his best work. Remember how you felt as you considered identifying yourself to take on more responsibility. Also remember to be patient. As Richard Foster said, “ Our tendency is to overestimate what we can accomplish in one year, but underestimate what we can accomplish in ten years.” the very nature of a disciple tells us it takes time to cultivate and nurture the passion required to accept the responsibility.

I still believe, more than ever, that it is also vital to take time to foster understanding and enthusiasm in your team of disciples and leaders. Encourage them as you would be encouraged, and remember the depth of your commitment and responsibilities. Live your life as an example. Tom Skinner said, “We must become the live demonstration here on earth of what is happening in Heaven, so that any time anyone wants to know what is happening in heaven all they have to do is check with us.”

My time as President of National Baptist Laymen’s Movement has just about drawn to a close. During my tenure, it has been my intention to learn and to build my own resolve and foundation as I supported and led all of you. While I join the ranks of the leaders that proceeded me... and while my name may be etched in a plaque for posterity, please know that I am very much here and will still continue to spread the word of our faith.

Philippians 3:12-14 states, “Not that I have already obtained it or become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet, but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

To my predecessors, thank you for the wisdom and the road map you’ve left to follow. This experience has taught me to seek deeper meaning and to respect my fellow man at more profound levels. My service has shown me the way to honor humanity while relentlessly trying to decode so many mysteries of life. The path to this moment has been twisted as much as it has been clear, but I made it to this point... please know that whatever you face in life... no matter how daunting or impossible or foggy the path might seem... with God... and this brotherhood on you side, you will prevail.

To my successor, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, it is now your turn to lead the way to salvation... for all of us. I wish you peace and productivity... good health and unimaginable spiritual gratification...To my fellow Laymen, may you continue to find your strength in the light of the Lord.

I want to thank all of you for being here and continuing to explore your relationship to your faith. I am proud of the Godly community we have built. May you all find the strength to carry His word with you to inspire a whole new generation of godly men to join our cause. The door is always open and our ministry is available to answer questions and provide even more guidance. You can find us at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

In closing, I would like to sum up what we've discussed with a thought from Francis Chan. “The core problem isn’t the fact that we’re lukewarm, halfhearted, or stagnant Christians. The crux of it all is why we are this way, and it is because we have an inaccurate view of God. We see Him as a benevolent Being who is satisfied when people manage to fit Him into their lives in some small way. We forget that God never had an identity crisis. He knows that He’s great and deserves to be the center of our lives.” **Amen**... Thank you all and may God Bless...